

Abusive Bosses

By Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

What can you do if you have an abusive boss? If your boss is physically abusive or threatening, don't put up with it for a minute. Tell a bigger boss or Personnel. Companies don't tolerate this behavior much anymore, unless the abuser is a money-maker, in which case they might. If you get no response, you can take action against the company and/or leave.

What if the abuse is verbal? She yells at you in front of others, calls you names. Or, *he* screws up on a project, but screams at *you*.

Find a strategy that will stop the behavior. Your best bet is to ask co-workers what's worked in the past when she verbally bashed others. Can you yell back without getting fired? Can you be sarcastic? Do you get HR involved? Can you just tell her to stop? Or does everyone put up with it and get revenge in passive-aggressive ways, like spitting in her coffee or deliberately dragging when he's trying to impress superiors?

Two cautionary notes: (1) When you confront your boss, she may deny her behavior and blame you for her foul temper. Don't play that game. Tell her how you want to be treated and what you will do if you're not (like yell back or leave), but do it, or your next threat will carry no weight. (2) Your boss may — surprise! — sound appreciative of the confrontation and promise to change. Don't bet on it. Habits go bone-deep and don't readily change. You'll have this conversation again ... and again.

Use the strategy that works. With one abusive boss, I stayed out of her way and got even by being disloyal. With another, I gave as good as I got, and he laughed. With a third, I ignored his toothless tirades.

The most important thing is to decide and do what feels right: Take it to Personnel, quit, shrug it off, spit in his coffee.

P.S. Memo to abusive bosses reading this: Better get your own coffee for the next few days.